

Former Queen Anne gas station site goes green

New park at heart of Uptown branding push

By DEIRDRE GREGG STAFF WRITER

In an effort to help transform the Lower Queen Anne area of Seattle, the city is converting a former gas station at the corner of Roy Street and Queen Anne Avenue North into a public park.

The new park is intended to provide some welcome green space in a densely developed area. But it also is expected to help establish an identity for "Uptown," the neighborhood typically known as Lower Queen Anne that stretches between Queen Anne and Seattle Center.

The site is steeped in Seattle history. It's at the bottom of the counterbalance, the former trolley route that used counterweights to help cars negotiate Queen Anne Hill. It's also next to the former site of The Blob, the lumpy stucco restaurant demolished in 1997.

Short-term uses might include setting up an arts-and-crafts stall or putting in picnic tables and flowers.

The park site "is in the heart of Uptown, and it's also a gateway between Uptown and the top of Queen Anne Hill," said Jean Sundborg, past president of the Uptown Alliance neighborhood association and a longtime advocate for the park.

On June 18, Uptown Alliance and Seattle Parks and Recreation are sponsoring a community gathering on the site to celebrate the purchase of the land, a culmination of two years of work by the Parks Department.

The department spent months in the summer of 2002 working with the neighborhood association to identify potential sites. Then the Parks Department had to resolve questions of environmental liability.

California-based Unocal Corp. had operated a gas station at the location for years. In December 1999, Unocal remediated the property and sold it to an unrelated investor, Union Group LLC, and indemnified Union Group against environmental claims for any contamination that might have migrated to surrounding land.

When the city set out to acquire the

property from Union Group, it asked Unocal to assign the same indemnification to the city. It took the city, Unocal and Union Group several months to figure out how to word a contract they could all agree on.

At the City Council meeting authorizing the purchase, Council-member Richard Conlin said resolving the liability question was critical.

"There was some concern that we might jeopardize the park as a result, and that was a very serious concern for us, but we did feel that it was important that the owner took care of that contamination," he said.

On April 15, the city finally purchased the quarter-acre lot for \$1.7 million.

Funds for the purchase and development of the park come from the \$198 million Pro Parks levy that Seattle voters approved four years ago.

The city will provide \$269,000 to develop the site, and Uptown Alliance president John Coney said the group is looking into forming a nonprofit to raise additional funds.

Raising those funds will take some time, and design work won't start until next year, said Catherine Anstett with Seattle Parks and Recreation. The Parks Department is working with the neighborhood group to find temporary fixes.

"We're asking the community for two things — what are their ideas for some quick interim uses that could happen this summer, and what are some inexpensive temporary improvements that could be made on the site," Anstett said.

The park-to-be has already gotten some temporary spiffing up: The city placed barriers around the site to keep cars from parking on it. A layer of gravel was laid down to level the ground, and vines were planted to cover a wall and protect it from graffiti.

Sundborg said short-term uses might include setting up an arts-and-crafts stall or putting in picnic tables and flowers. The neighborhood association's Uptown Stroll in September will start at the site, she said.